DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 012 CS 503 391

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TITLE Mass Media Use by Children and Media Education in Germany.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (31st, Minneapolis, MN, May 21-25, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audiovisual Aids; *Educational Practices; Educational Research; Educational Trends; Foreign Countries; *Mass Media; *School Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Germany; Media Role; *Media Use

ABSTRACT

Efforts to include the mass media in school instruction in Germany date back almost as far as the modern mass media themselves. However, the latter were, at best, nearly always used as an instrumental means and not as a subject of education in their own right. The basic findings of a representative survey of teachers in the Federal Republic of Germany presents an ambivalent picture of media education in this sense: even though many teachers use mass media as a subject of their instruction, an obvious lack of consensus exists among them as to the regularity and amount of time spent on it, the aspects of content related to it, and the appropriate methodology with which to approach it. A comparison of the specific data shows that the preference for the printed rather than the audiovisual media and the choice of practical examples for school instruction do not bear enough relevance to the specific use of mass media by children and adolescents, therefore violating a basic educational principle of school instruction. The educational aims of the teachers tend to be determined in this case by a critical distance to the mass media and an uncertainty about their role in the lives of the students rather than by impartiality. (Author/HOD)

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MASS MEDIA USE BY CHILDREN AND MEDIA EDUCATION IN GERMANY

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Paper presented at the XXXI International Conference on Communication by the International Communication Association (ICA), May 21-25, 1981, Minneapolis, USA.

SS033911

Mass Media Use by Children and Media Education in Germany

- Abstract -

Efforts to include the mass media in school instruction in Germany date back almost as far as the modern mass media themselves. However, the latter were, at best, nearly always used as an instrumental means and not as a subject of school teaching and education in their own right. This situation only changed in the last decade. In so far communication research can no longer limit itself to the study of the mere instrumental use of the media in class, but must now begin to examine the extent to which the mass media are handled, the methodology used, the points of view, and aims of teaching this topic with regard to content, and which objective and subjective factors their treatment depends on.

The basic findings of a representative survey of teachers in the Federal Republic of Germany gives an ambivalent picture of media education in this sense:Even though many teachers (of particular subjects) indeed use mass media as a subject of their instruction, an obvious lack of consensus exists among them where this topic is concerned. On the whole this is not as true of the importance attributed to the topic as of the regularity and amount of time spent on it, of aspects of content related to it, or of the appropriate methodology with which to approach ist. Above all, a comparison of the specific data shows that the preference for the printed rather than the audio-visual media and the choice of practical examples for school instruction do not near enough relevance to the specific use of the mass media by children and adolescents, therefore violating in this particular area a basic educational principle of school instruction. Indeed the educational aims of the teachers tend to be determined in this case by a critical distance to the mass media and an uncertainty about their role in the lives of their students rather than by impartiality.

Based on a survey of german teachers will be presented and discussed primarily such findings which seem to be of a principal interest in this area of instructional communication and the research in this field and which should be compared internationally.

Dr. Jürgen Wilke / Barbara Eschenauer M.A.

I

In the Federal Republic of Germany today's children and adolescents between the ages of six and seventeen devote, on average, two hours of their time per day to the mass media television, radio and the daily newspaper.[1] Television accounts for 72 minutes (=62%) of this time, radio for 37 minutes (=32%) and the daily newspaper for 8 minutes (=7%). In addition to this, 24 minutes are spent each day listening to records or using cassettes, as well as 18 minutes which are spent reading other newspapers, magazines, fiction booklets or comics. Television reaches daily 85% of the children and adolescents in this age group, radio 67%, records and cassettes 45%, newspapers 42%, magazines 27%, comics 23% and magazines published specifically for this age group 8%. Partly, well over 80% of the children and adolescents live in households where a television set, a radio, a record player, a cassette recorder or tape recorder is available, and a daily newspaper is subscribed to. Every other person in this age group is in either personal or joint possession with a sister or brother of a record player, every fifth of a radio or transistor, almost every fifth of their own television set. Plus the fact that the greatest number of regular cinema goers is also found among adolescents between the ages of 14 and 19.[2]

The basic facts about media use and the range of the mass media show the great relevance of the media in the lives of today's young Germans, even though the figures are, in part, considerably lower than in other countries with a comparable standard of living, e.g. the United States. In addition to this, the data also illustrate the specific structure of media use in childhood and youth, which is determined by the specific interests and needs of adolescents from the age of entering school to maturity, and in which, in the course of the years, considerable shifts naturally take place in the duration, the times and preferences with regard to content in media use. At the same time children and adolescents are in no way left untouched by the availability of media meant for adults. On the contrary, television viewing time of even the younger children in Germany has, for example in recent years, switched more and more to the later evening.

If the mass media are among those components of the environment taken for granted by today's children and adolescents, if intensive use is made of them and they make up a considerable part of out-of-school activities, then this development was accompanied, at least in Germany, by a great deal of concern and grave misgivings by those responsible for the education of young people. For young people are exposed to the influence of the mass media during a phase in their development which is crucial for their cognitive and emotional maturity, and in which they only begin to form in full predispositions shown by communication research to be decisive for their reception of the mass media and of their effect on them.

Not only have the mass media confronted parents with new and often difficult problems, but it is also felt in Germany that they have passed beyond the private sphere of life and become a challenge for school, that most important institution of socialization, second only to the family. To come to terms with this challenge educationally has become the task not only of the basic school system, but has meanwhile also been taken up in out of school activities, in the area of pre-school education as well as in adult education.[3]

II

Although it is only in more recent years the mass media have been included both as a teaching aid and a topic in the school curriculum in Germany, with the result that new scientific disciplines have been established for its study, this development is in fact not new historically. After the initial rejection on moral and cultural grounds of the periodical newspapers which came into existence in the early 17th century, people only very gradually began to realize that the newspaper was of educational value. Corresponding to a pragmatic educational ideal, the value of the newspaper as an instructional medium, providing information and knowledge not obtainable from any other source, was recognized. Numerous documents of school regulations, curricula and reading programmes indicate at least that newspapers were already being read systematically as part of school instruction in the 18th century, particularly in subjects like Geography, History and Grammar.

The school in Germany saw itself confronted by a new educational challenge in the last decade of the 19th century with the development of the film and the cinema. Just as two centuries before in the case of the newspaper, the new medium was again rejected on moral grounds, appearing particularly suspicious because its origins were in the entertainment world of the fair and the vaudeville theatre. A movement for the reform of the cinema was formed and it took up the fight against what was assumed to be the corruptive influence of the film on children and adolescents. On the other hand, first experiments were soon undertaken "to make use of cinematography as audio-visual material and instructional aids, with the aim of extending and revitalising the traditional inventory of instructional media because of its particular technical potential for demonstration and expression. It concerns not so much the preoccupation with the film as a subject of instruction but far more the gaining of a new educational medium to be used alongside books, the blackboard and visual aids."[4]

In contrast to the development of the newspaper and the film was the starting point for school and teachers in Germany of broadcasting when it became a new mass medium in the twenties. Whereas the press and the film had become media of public communication thanks to private business and commercial interests, the organisation of broadcasting was, right from the start, the responsibility of the state. This guaranteed the preservation of traditional cultural values in the programmes, so that there was little reason for persons responsible for education to reject it. However, after the Second World War the same old reaction to television was again evident: on the one hand, people complained about the inherent dangers of this medium and believed that some kind of educational compensation was necessary: on the other hand, television's own didactic instructional possibilities were quickly recognized, which led at times to an euphoric expansion of instructional television. As a result of this "medial rearmament of instruction"[5] television became more of a thematically indifferent instrument rather than a subject of instruction which drew its meaning from the social relevance of the medium.

The exclusive or fundamental allocation of the media to the didactics of school instruction and their choice mainly from the methodological point of view have been abandoned in Germany since the sixties. There has been an increasing awareness that the media have a bilateral status for school; that as well as their methodological relevance they are, or should also be, just as relevant in terms of content. It was argued that, because of their great influence on behaviour and consciousness, the mass media should not be placed on one level with calculators, illustrations or other instrumental media.

III

The aim of a representative survey of teachers in the whole of the Federal Republic of Germany carried out in 1979 was to establish whether, and to what extent, the mass media have become a subject of school instruction rather than a mere instructional device. School instruction is a very complex and dynamic process, determined by a great number of objective and subjective factors.[6] The objective factors include school organisation, school equipment, timetables and the contents of textbooks, the socio-cultural environment in the broader sense, plus specific powers from outside school, such as the state, science and organisations. The subjective factors include the motives and role expectations of teachers, their own personal attitudes and didactic and methodological aims, their self-conception, their manner of behaviour and also their professional qualifications. School instruction is also naturally determined by similar subjective factors on the part of the students. School instruction will differ from case to case since the above-mentioned features are bound to vary. It is not possible to include the whole complexity of school instruction in one survey. However, it is possible in this way to describe the basic features of instructional practice and also to establish characteristic traits and subjective factors on which teachers' treatment of particular topics depend.

With this in mind, the aim of our survey was to establish the relevance attached to the topic of the mass media in school instruction, which instructional medium was used when dealing with it, which points of view determined the instruction and, above all, to what extent the treatment of the topic was relevant to the children's and adolescents' own specific experience of the media. Some basic results of the survey will be summarized below. It was addressed to a representative sample of 303 teachers, 199 of whom completed the questionnaires sent to them. In other words, 65.7% were returned, which, according to the rules of the method, justifies a generalization of the results.

IV.

Of the 199 teachers, 181 (=91%) have already dealt with the mass media in their lessons: 72 (=36%) deal with them regularly, 87 (=44%) now and then, occasionally, and 22 (=11%) rarely. According to subjective judgement, every tenth teacher sees it as a central instructional topic and over 60% of them consider it at least one of the more important topics. Only every fourth teacher considers the mass media not more important than other topics and only three percent of those asked definitely thought that other topics were more important. Younger teachers rate its importance higher than older ones. Almost half of the teachers admit that they would like to spend more time on the topic. And, according to information received from the teachers, the students' interest in dealing with the mass media is relatively high.

The majority, three-quarters of the teachers, admit that they work independent of the material from existing textbooks when dealing with the mass media. They criticise it for not being topical enough; in other words, teachers prefer to deal with this topic by means of original published material. However, only just a quarter of the teachers regularly use audio-visual aids when dealing with this topic, just under 60% use them now and then, occasionally, while the others apparently do not depend on technical aids at all. Technical aids are

used least in the lower classes, and their use is greatly dependent on the teacher's age: younger teachers attach more importance to technical support in their lessons on the mass media than do older ones.

V.

There are various ways of dealing with the mass media in school instruction in terms of methodology. Basically, the teacher can either inform the students theoretically about this subject, thereby providing them with factual knowledge, or he can use practical examples and exercises, take original contributions from the mass media as a starting point, or even try to simulate journalistic media-specific production in role-playing games. Recent German literature about media education provides a good number of instructional models which presuppose that practical work with the media has a greater value in terms of experience and knowledge.

In order to establish their preferences the teachers were asked whether they dealt with the mass media in the main theoretically, with information and discussion, or whether they mainly used practical examples and exercises. A third category was provided, in which theoretical and practical work complemented each other equally.

- Table 1 -

Half of the teachers evaluated the theoretical and practical approaches to the topic as complementing each other equally, whereas only 13% admitted to dealing with the mass media in a mainly theoretical way. Therefore, it is fair to say that most teachers do not consider it appropriate to the topic to just provide knowledge about the mass media. On the contrary, far more teachers approach the topic in a mainly practical way, e.g. by writing and choosing items of news, by producing a layout for a page of a newspaper, or by producing a radio play etc. This kind of practical lesson work is especially prevalent in the lower classes, while theoretical instruction becomes more and more important in secondary education.

VI.

In order to examine the importance of each mass medium in school instruction teachers were asked to rank the media television, radio, cinema and films, records, tapes and cassettes as well as magazines and newspapers in their order of importance for their lessons: if the medium was the focal point of their instruction it was given a high grading ("1") or if it was on the periphery or not dealt with at all a low one ("6"). Another section of the questionnaire asked the teachers to rank the media in the same way in terms of their social relevance. An index was formed in each case in order to compare the hierarchy of the social significance of the media, in the teachers' opinion, with the hierarchy of their treatment of this topic in school instruction.

- Table 2 -

On the whole the German public as well as the teaching profession tend to be of the same opinion in their evaluation of the different mass media: television dominates over the newspaper, with radio, magazines, records, tapes and cassettes a long way behind. Cinema and films are the least important. However, a deviation from this ranking is apparent in school instruction, where the newspaper comes before the television. This preference for the printed, topical medium can not only be traced back to the advantages in terms of availability and practical usefulness of the newspaper in class, but it also seems to be an expression of an educational and normative preference for printed rather than audio-visual coding, and at the same time for the informational rather than the entertaining function. By placing the emphasis on the newspaper in school instruction teachers find themselves - albeit apparently unwittingly in agreement with certain findings of communication research, which point to the advantages of printed coding in the cognitive process, but by doing so they generally ignore the top ranking of television in the media use of children and adoslescents.

There is total agreement in the low rating of the other media in terms of social value and their value for school instruction. The two seem to be connected here. Whereas radio is considered socially more important than the magazine, the latter - a printed medium - becomes more important in school instruction. In the case of records, tapes and cassettes, the cinema and films there is virtually no discrepancy in the ranking of the media's relevance for society and their place in school instruction; in other words there is little disagreement about the role of the mass media in either of these respects.

This result is essentially confirmed with a further question about which contributions from the mass media school instruction is based on or takes into consideration. Included in the table are also data concerning the age range of the children in the relevant classes.

- Table 3 -

It becomes clear that journalistic contributions from local newspapers are considered most often and consistently in all the age ranges. Apart from the lowest age groups this is also true for tabloid-papers. In contrast, nationally distributed newspapers are used as a source by more and more teachers as the age of their students increases. Contributions from radio and television occur most often in the lowest age range, becoming less important in school instruction for older age groups. Finally, comics are used as the subject of school instruction by more than one third of the teachers in the lowest age group, ie. with children aged between 6 and 9, but are still used by over 40% of the teachers of older students.

The question to what extent media education in school instruction, as shown in this data, is based on the specific media use by children and adolescents can now be examined in more detail if we analyse the data, mentioned at the beginning of the lecture, about media use in relation to these age groups.[7]

- Table 4 -

On the one hand, television is indeed the medium with the greatest range among children and adolescents between the ages of six and seventeen, but on the other hand, it increases relatively little during these years, ie. the use of television is the least dependent on age. In contrast, the use of radio as well as records, tapes and cassettes increases greatly with age. This increase is even more significant in the case of the newspaper, which reaches 14% of the 6-9 year olds daily but 65% of the 13-17 year olds. The range of comics scarcely differs in the 6-9 and 10-12 year old groups, but decreases sharply in the 13-17 year old group. Shifts are also evident in the amount of time spent using the individual media. Not only does the time budget increase by more than half from the youngest to the oldest group; shifts in preferred areas of interest also appear. Magazines, fiction booklets, comics as well as television benefit least from this increase in time spent on the media, while time spent reading the newspaper increases sixfold, listening to the radio threefold and listening to records, tapes and cassettes fourfold.

According to this comparison, it is hardly possible to maintain that teachers in German schools base their treatment of the mass media appropriately or sufficiently on the specific use of the mass media by children and adolescents, thus not adhering to the educational principle of providing instruction appropriate to the age of the students. It is true that in the lower classes television plays comparatively the greatest role in class, as it does in children's experience of the media. However, even here it is obvious that the newspaper is used more often although is has very little importance as a medium for these schoolchildren. It is also impossible to maintain that the "entertainment media", radio, records, tapes and cassettes are adequately included in school instruction, whereas comics tend to be overrepresented in the higher age group in comparison with the decreasing interest in them. Thus it seems that teachers who deal with the mass media in class do not have a very definite idea of the way and extent in which the media are used by children and adolescents, allowing themselves at the moment to be guided more by the media world of the adult or even by their own preferences. This poses, of course, a principle problem about media education: should one just reproduce and discuss the children's own experience in this area, or should one transcend to other experiences, and, for example, prepare students for the media use of adults?

VII.

A further aim of our survey was to establish how teachers judge the role of the mass media in the lives of their students. Asked whether, when all things are considered, the mass media play a positive, beneficial rather than a negative, unbeneficial role in the lives of their students, opinions of the teachers are divided into three almost equally sized groups: the group of those who thought that the mass media played a mainly positive role in their students' lives was the biggest with 37%, while in each of the other two groups a third thought that it played a more negative, unbeneficial role (32%) or did not know or were undecided (31%). The relatively high number of "don't knows" should not come as too much of a surprise since our question demanded a simple answer about a complex issue. On the other hand, it indicates a not inconsiderable uncertainty in teachers when confronted by the mass media and their influence on their students.

Especially noticeable is the fact that twice as many younger teachers as older ones ascribe a more negative, unbeneficial role to the mass media. Although younger teachers in Germany have grown up from childhood with today's established media system and its many channels, which in this respect is taken for granted by them, they evidently look upon the mass media more critically and with greater reservation, while the older teachers, who, for the most part at least, grew up before the expansion of television, have a more positive attitude towards the role of the mass media in their students' lives.

Our analysis establishes that the decision to deal with the mass media in class is not really dependent on whether they are thought to have a positive or negative influence on students. This is more true for the wish to spend more time on this topic. In other words, the teachers who would like to spend more time on the mass media in school instruction are those who, on the whole, judge the role of the mass media in their students' lives as being more positive than those teachers who consider the time available for this topic sufficient.

In addition to this general question about the role of the mass media in the lives of students, teachers were also asked to agree or disagree with eleven pre-formulated opinions about the mass media, of which five were formulated positively and six negatively.

- Table 5 -

The two opinions which found most consensus were of a positive nature: the mass media provide mental stimulation and are important instruments for further education outside the school. Teachers recognize that the mass media extend and also form the primary experience of their students without becoming a rival to school, as might be expected. For, only every fifth teacher sees a danger in the mass media, in that they distract students from their homework or cause them to have too high an opinion of their own knowledge. There are other misgivings which appear far more important: that the mass media can easily lead to passivity, affect children physically and cause a deterioration in human relationships. Moral dangers, which have only too readily been attributed to the mass media for a long time, are only placed in fourth position among possible dangers named, and are considered thus by about every third teacher. Positive consequences of the mass media on political participation and their usefulness for meaningful leisure time activity or relaxation are mentioned even more rarely.

On the whole, it seems that the opinion of German teachers about the role the mass media plays in their students's lives is formed more by intuitive, subjective assumptions and slogans in general circulation than by scientifically based knowledge of the topic. The reason for this is, that for the most part, teachers have nothing to do with mass communication research during their training.

VIII.

As we have illustrated, efforts to include the mass media in school instruction in Germany date back almost as far as the modern mass media themselves. However, the latter were, at best, nearly always used as an instrumental <u>means</u> and not as a <u>subject</u> of school teaching and

education in their own right. This situation only changed in the last decade. In so far as the mass media has meanwhile developed from being a means to being a subject of school instruction, communication research can no longer limit itself to the study of the mere instrumental use of the media in class, but must now begin to examine the extent to which the mass media are handled, the methodology used, the points of view, and aims of teaching this topic with regard to content, and which objective and subjective factors their treatment depends on.[8]

In our representative survey of teachers we tried to establish the level in media education that has meanwhile been reached in German schools. It is impossible to present and analyse all our findings here; we can however say that an ambivalent situation is apparent: even though many teachers (of particular subjects) indeed use the mass media as a subject of their instruction, an obvious lack of consensus exists among them where there topic is concerned. On the whole this is not as true of the importance attributed to the topic as of the regularity and amount of time spent on it, of aspects of content related to it, or of the appropriate methodology with which to approach it. Above all, we established here that the preference for the printed rather than the audio-visual media and the choice of practical examples for school instruction do not bear enough relevance to the specific use of the mass media by children and adolescents, therefore violating in this particular area a basic pedagogical principle of school instruction. Indeed the educational aims of the teachers tend to be determined in this case by a critical distance to the mass media and an uncertainty about their role in the lives of their students rather than by impartiality. The findings of our investigation, ambivalent in several respects, demand as a consequence, above all, that teachers are made acquainted with mass communication research and its results during their training, something that has been largely lacking in Germany up to now, so that they can introduce their students to the use of the omnipresent mass media with more professional competence.

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Table 1: The theoretical and practical treatment of the mass media in school instruction

Question: "Do you deal with the mass media in class in the main theoretically ie. providing information for discussion, or do you mainly use practical examples and exercises?"

	n	%
"I deal with the topic in a mainly theoretical way (Information, discussion)"	24	13
"I use more practical examples and exercises"	58	32
"Theoretical and practical work complement each other equally"	88	49
"Difficult to say"	11	6
Teachers who deal with the mass media in class	181	100

Table 2: Comparison of the relevance of the several mass media for society and the significance of the several mass media for school instruction, according to the teachers (Index values*)

	Significance of the several mass media for society	Significance of the several mass media in school instruction
Television	0.89	0.74
Newspapers	0.76	0.82
Radio	0.58	0.45
Magazines	0.52	0.55
Records, tapes, cassettes	0.41	0.43
Cinema, films	0.35	0.36

* An index was formed according to the ranking of several media of the teachers questioned. The first rank was rated 6, the second 5, the third 4, the fourth 3, the fifth 2 and the sixth 1. The values were added together and the sum divided by the number of rankings (6) and the number of cases.

Table 3: Age groups in school in which the mass media are dealt with and the preference shown for contributions from the mass media as examples in school instruction

Contributions from the mass media	Age groups in school where the mass media were dealt with* 6 – 9 %	10 – 11 %	12 – 15 %	16 – 18 %	Total %
Journalistic contributions from the local newspaper	75	82	76	73	77
Journalistic contributions from nationally distributed newspapers	8	50	63	76	53
Journalistic contributions from tabloid papers	17	66	66	69	59
Journalistic contributions from other newspapers	4	21	21	16	19
Journalistic contributions from teenage magazines	38	53	38	27	37
Journalistic contributions from books	17	16	16	16	14
Literary contributions from the press	17	13	12	14	12
Literary contributions from radio and television	4	29	28	39	24
Other contributions from radio and television	67	58	42	43	45
Comics	38	66	47	41	45
Fiction booklets	4	40	33	33	28
Popsongs, records	21	26	33	31	28
Other	–	5	2	2	1
Total	310	525	477	480	444
n (Teachers who use practical examples when dealing with the mass media in class)	(24)	(38)	(117)	(51)	(146)

* Multiple entries possible!

Table 4: Range and use of the mass media by children and adolescents

	Tele-vision	Radio	Records, cassettes	News-papers	Maga-zines	Children and teen-age maga-zines	Fiction booklets	Comics
Range (per day in %)								
Children from 6 – 9	82	53	30	14	14	2	1	27
Children from 10 – 12	88	59	40	42	25	9	2	32
Children from 13 – 17	87	84	60	65	39	11	7	13
Children from 6 – 17 total	85	67	45	42	27	8	4	23
Time budget (per day in minutes)								
Children from 6 – 9	52	17	10	2		13		
Children from 10 – 12	58	26	32	7		16		
Children from 13 – 17	83	59	40	13		19		
Children from 6 – 17 total	66	37	23	8		18		

Table 5: Opinions about the role of the mass media in the lives of students

Question: "Concerning the question, whether the mass media plays a more positive or more negative role: one can have different opinions. Which of the following opinions do you agree with?"

	n	%
"The mass media provide mental stimulation, extend horizons, awaken consciousness of problems and a sense of responsibility"	144	72
"The mass media are important instruments in further education outside school"	134	67
"The mass media easily lead to passivity, lethargy and escapism"	117	59
"The mass media can lead to physical damage and strain"	110	55
"The mass media lead to deterioration in human relationships with parents and fellow students of the same age"	85	43
"The mass media involve moral and ethical dangers"	62	31
"The mass media facilitate the equal participate of all in public life"	56	28
"The mass media form meaningful leasure time activity and facilitate relaxation"	54	27
"The mass media easily lead students to too high an opinion of their own knowledge"	38	19
"The mass media keep students from their homework"	37	19
"The mass media offer guidance in acting realistically"	29	15
Total	866	435
(Teachers questioned)	(199)	(100)